

Nightclubbing: Edinburgh's Pure – Scotland's Greatest '90s Night



Edinburgh sits in the shade of an 823 ft. geological metaphor for its electronic music scene. Arthur's Seat is a green sprawl of cliffs, warrens and gentle slopes popular with hillwalkers; it was also once a volcano. There are few places that look better on a postcard than Scotland's capital, but these days it leaves a little to be desired when it comes to its club culture. That's not always been the case. In 1990, this quietest of capital cities found itself in the midst of a violent and completely unexpected eruption.

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By



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Pure wasn't the only show in town, by any stretch. The night that JD Twitch and Brainstorm ran for a decade at The Venue had its fair share of competition, particularly its angstier, abrasive cousin Sativa. Each one helped contribute to a thriving, near-legendary scene in Edinburgh, but Pure was the gateway, and the club that has left the strongest mark on a city notorious for being difficult to impress.

A certain book written by Irvine Welsh in the early '90s portrayed Edinburgh as the heroin capital of Europe. In reality, though, the city's drug problem wasn't as big as its thug problem. Football casuals hung out in clubs regularly, and would designate certain areas of the city centre as their turf. The city's two football teams, Hearts and Hibernian (or Hibs for short) weren't particularly successful, but their fans became very good at fighting each other – something Twitch and Brainstorm saw firsthand as newly-installed residents at Pure's predecessor, UFO.

"It was the Madchester era, so it'd all be like these indie bands [at UFO] that neither of us particularly liked, but we were going crazy for these house and techno, Warp records, whatever," remembers Keith McIvor, AKA Twitch. "It was music that was just exploding. And it was reasonably successful – it could depend on the night – but it was the era of the Happy Mondays, so we would reluctantly have to play a Happy Mondays record every half hour to fill up the dancefloor, and then we could play these crazy LFO records.

There were tables flying through the air, and Andy [Brainstorm] and I are hiding under the mixing desk; people taking their first E were coming up and bodies were flying through the

air. There was a full scale riot.

— Twitch

“On the last night UFO ever happened, this band called the Paris Angels, this Manchester band, were playing, and for some reason they must’ve had quite a lot of fans who were Hearts supporters, so there was this heavy atmosphere in the club. And the guy made some inflammatory comment that the Hibs supporters obviously didn’t like, and then, literally, it was like a Wild West pub brawl. There were tables flying through the air, and Andy [Brainstorm] and I are hiding under the mixing desk; people taking their first E were coming up and bodies were flying through the air. There was a full scale riot.

“About half an hour later, about six police vans totally blocked off the building; there are about 50 police in the club just making a circle on the dancefloor, and they carted about two coachloads of people off to the police station. The band ended up in hospital because they got a total doing, and we were left there. Edinburgh’s chief of police guy said, ‘this club cannot continue.’ And we thought ‘well, fuck it, that was a laugh. That’s the end of that.’”

It was, and it wasn’t.



To appease the police and to weed out Edinburgh's violent fringe elements, a membership scheme was devised and the club night was given a new name: Pure. Out went Madchester, and in came pretty much everything else: house and techno records were the night's bread and butter, but plenty of room was made for rave, breakbeat, and more idiosyncratic selections such as The Clash's "Rock the Casbah" and "Ace of Spades" by Motörhead. It was a colourful and imaginative approach to DJing that Twitch and Brainstorm imposed onto the club's rather functional interior. (As the name suggests, The Venue was a no-frills affair.) They did it with an impressive production set-up: Smoke machines would fill the room until it resembled an *Apocalypse Now* outtake. Sometimes people wouldn't be able to see past their own noses. The lighting would go from gentle, floating psychedelic beams to throbbing, flickering strobes, according to the mood and intensity of the music.

Despite the diversity of genres that Twitch and Brainstorm played, Pure is still remembered as a techno night. Though Richie Hawtin, Derrick May and Jeff Mills (the latter of whom played his very first UK date at Pure) were indisputably iconic guests, Twitch and Brainstorm brought Ron Trent, μ-Ziq, Moodymann and Orbital to Edinburgh, too.



“People think ‘oh, Pure, banging techno, hard acid music,’” says McIvor, “and that was part of it. But it was much, much, much more varied. I’ve got a mix on my SoundCloud from 1991, and it’s all pretty much house music, and what now would be called deep house. It was a very varied night. Even the name Pure was kind of cocking a snook at musical purism.

“We were always very wide open, especially in the early years of the club. We would have Chicago house guys playing, we had Aphex Twin playing live on the stage with loads of boxes all connected... We were interested in all kinds of aspects of electronic dance music.”

Twitch would phone record shops across the UK searching for new music.

“Interested” is probably an understatement. McIvor would phone record shops across the UK searching for new music, and would ask sales assistants to play records down the line to him. Labels in the US and Europe would receive letters from Pure asking for new records. It was an obsessive quest to introduce new music to Edinburgh.

Brainstorm, better known as Andrew Watson, reaffirms Twitch’s point on the night’s early days: “Pure wasn’t a techno club. I know that Keith has said that many, many times and it’s sort of grown into this thing where it’s perceived to be a techno club, but I’ve put a load of mixes from the ’90s that I did – ’90, ’92, that sort of era – and there’s a lot of stuff that’s not techno.

“The whole club scene was quite different, the whole cultural scene was quite different. There was a lot of violence going on on the edges. People weren’t necessarily friendly. There were a lot of fairly unpleasant incidents going on in clubs around about that sort of time, fighting and all manner of stuff. That whole side of things [football violence] was pretty big at that time. That seemed to die out a bit as the whole rave club scene cottoned on, and everything became a lot more mellow.”



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As football-related violence subsided, a completely different culture replaced it. Ecstasy flooded the UK, and dancers dived in headfirst. It radically reshaped the clubbing experience, and was the totem around which brand new rituals were formed. It is a prominent part of the Pure story; the supporting, ever-present character in anecdotes half-remembered and life-long friendships made inside the box-shaped sanctuary of The Venue.

"I found Pure to be a place at which I could feel at ease on the dancefloor," says Tom*, who was a Pure regular from 1996 to 2000. "The drugs obviously helped a bit, but it was so memorable for the sense of community and occasion every night had. It was always the place that you would greet people who you hardly knew from outside the club in such an open and friendly way. The afterparties were often as much of a highlight of nights as it meant more time to chat shit to friends, new and old. A few friends were more regular than others and would consume large amounts of drugs. This inevitably had an adverse effect on their general well-being. Other

friends took to DJing and producing music in some form, inspired by their nights at Pure.”

I really found shelter in music, and losing my mind with a bunch of smiling nutcases really became an effective therapy for me.

— Kris Walker, Wasabi Disco

Kris Walker, head of one of Edinburgh’s most widely-acclaimed parties, Wasabi Disco, is one of the city’s most prominent example of the latter. His night is often compared to Glasgow’s Optimo musically, but Walker insists that Pure was more important to him. “Pure became a massive part of my life. I began to meet new friends who I still hang out with and love dearly, although I was still only 16 when I moved into a flat uptown. My latter years in high school had been plagued by bullying, so I was hardly ever there for fear of getting slagged off or beaten up. Life at home wasn’t much better with the break up of my parents. I’d also recently been dumped from my first sexual relationship and was still completely in love with this girl, so my hormonal teenage head was a complete fucking mess.

“I really found shelter in music, and losing my mind with a bunch of smiling nutcases really became an effective therapy for me. I think if I had lived in a different time, or had been into a different music scene, I might have topped myself. Contrary to the press at the time, I found the whole scene and the people in it massively positive.”



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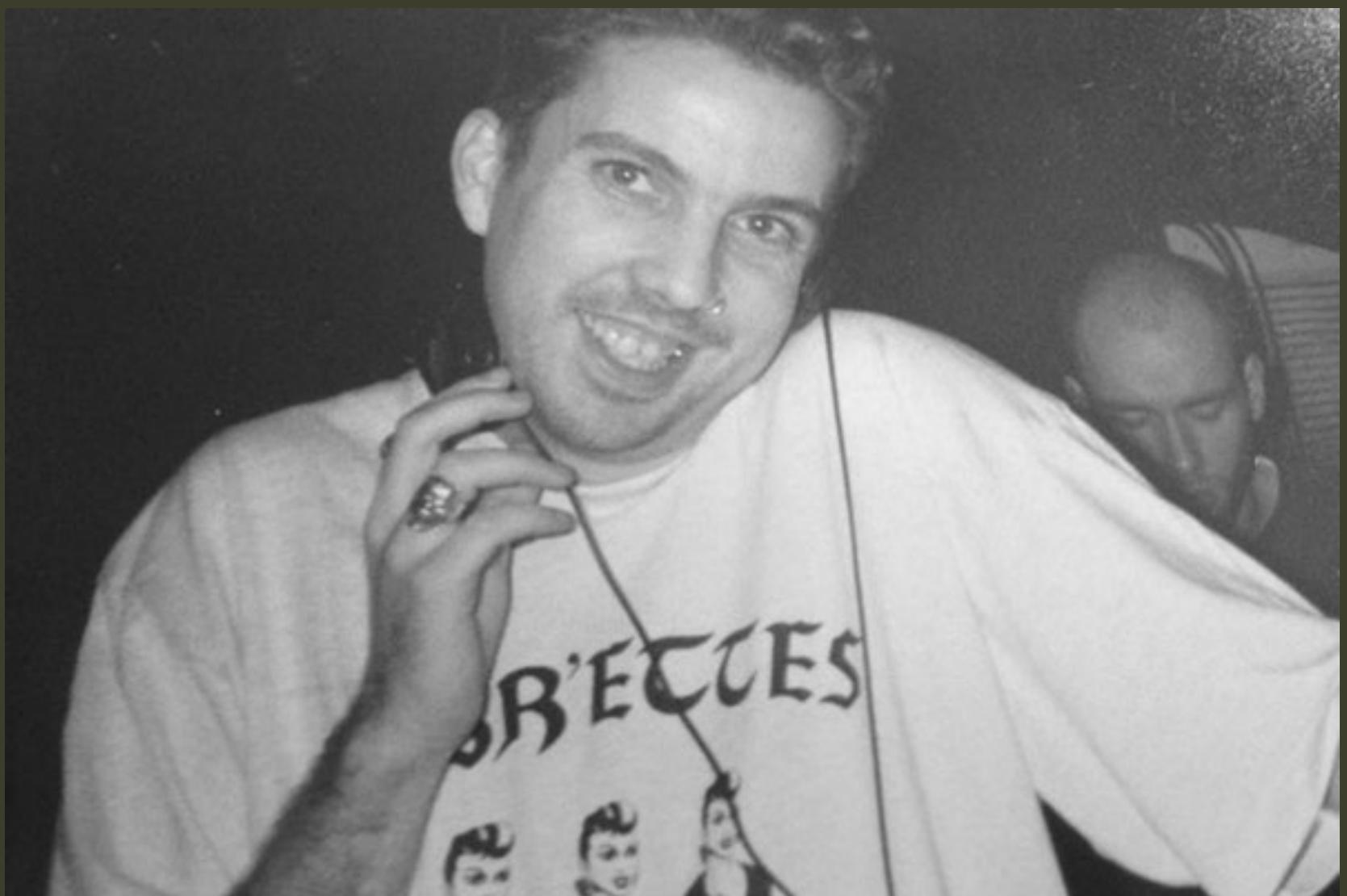
More often than not, the theme of salvation regularly comes up when speaking to Pure dancers. The night's popularity also seems to have been, at least in part, a reaction to Edinburgh's more established house scene. At the time, Tribal Funktion was Edinburgh's go-to house night, and proved instrumental in fostering the careers of artists such as Fudge Fingas and Linkwood. It was the prevalent sound in Glasgow as well, with Cajual and Relief records pounding most clubs in the city.

I've seen Derrick May play elsewhere – London and Manchester – but he never played like he did at Pure.
— Emma, Pure regular

"House music was thrilling, but it was the culture around it that sucked," remembers Abi, a Pure regular. "It was vacuous, even though the music was great. Then Pure came. Trainers, jeans, t-shirts and no make-up! It was a revelation. The dance-floor was a welcoming place. Folk would grab you from the outside edges and thrust you in the middle so you could get more of the action, so you could share in what they had. So you could be part of the same thing they were. It was a community. We were a tribe. And everybody knew it."

"As a girl I always felt safe at Pure," says Emma*, who was initially a Sativa reg-

ular before being introduced to the night through Sativa's residents. "Which is kind of ironic given the rep The Venue itself had. No-one ever bothered you. The venue was shabby, the ground floor toilet would flood regularly and you'd be walking through water. But the music was so, so good. I can't think of a more legendary club night in the UK. I've seen Derrick May play elsewhere – London and Manchester – but he never played like he did at Pure. I heard he said it was always his favourite gig to do, Jeff Mills too. I'm not at all surprised."



Andrew Weatherall at Pure

The devotion that Pure inspired can hardly be overstated. Tattoos of the Pure logo, which resembles something between a sniper's crosshairs and an S&M dog collar, can be found on people's arms, backs, chests and shoulders. Jobs were left, degrees forgotten about, responsibilities discarded. Minds were lost to a euphoric fog in which everyone sought refuge. People came by the busload from Aberdeen, Fife, Glasgow, and even London for weekends that lasted three days, and sometimes more. It was a place where everyone was welcome. Artists, punks, actors, MPs, crusties, students, working class kids, middle class kids, and people of every conceivable sexuality came together, and came up together.

"We would watch the audience," recalls McIvor, "especially in the early days. It was like a whole dancefloor was in one embrace, and there were certain records you would play, like 'Your Love' by Jamie Principle, and you would see big group

hugs developing on the dancefloor, people that had never met each other before being very, very intimate with someone. It was something weird with ecstasy that you had back then, there was a real empathetic feeling to the drug that perhaps maybe you don't get so much now. It was certainly a very loving atmosphere." It's worth noting that McIvor later brings up "casualties," and refers to an atmosphere that was "too druggy" near the end of our conversation.

"I'm amazed that we never had any real casualties, as in people being taken away to hospital from the club. Because I wasn't taking drugs, it was very obvious to me how much drugs other people were taking, and almost every single person was almost absolutely out of their mind."

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— Twitch

By the mid-'90s, Pure was big news. It had brought Detroit to Europe. Twitch, Brainstorm, The Bill and DJ Dribbler (the latter two were invited to become residents by McIvor and Watson, and would often play the basement part of the club, called The Cooler) played shows in Glasgow's Barrowlands Ballroom around a dozen times. McIvor and Watson set up a label, T&B Vinyl, and played abroad regularly as Pure's reputation grew. It was certainly outgrowing Edinburgh. At around the same time, Pure itself was being dwarfed by the sound it had been instrumental in pushing. Pure became harder, more techno some time around 1996 – and it signalled the beginning of a very prolonged end.

"To me, Pure's golden age was 1990 to 1996, and those years were absolutely amazing," says McIvor. "In some ways, I always thought that when it got to 1997, we should've said we were having a seven-year itch and that's the end. I think a lot of people that had come had grown up, moved away, left Edinburgh, got jobs or whatever, so the crowd changed... it was still a great crowd that came, but maybe those euphoric days had... the music had started to morph into, kinda loopy, hard techno, and it seemed to be that the people that were coming, that's what they

wanted. You kinda noticed the energy change. It was more masculine, and it kinda lost some of the sexiness and the variation in the music."



© Kris Walker

McIvor had set up Optimo in Glasgow with Jonnie Wilkes in 1998, in part to reassert the musical freedom he felt was slipping away at Pure, and also simply because he'd lost interest. By this time, Pure was relying on muscle memory. It had gone fortnightly in the same year, and it was an open secret that McIvor had become disillusioned. Watson is more hesitant to divulge how he felt about those last days – he only offers an insight into the records that he continued to play during that time: "A lot of the stuff that I think that I liked were from the earlier years, '92, '93. You can draw what you want from that."

With hindsight, my life could not possibly be this rich and happy and full if it hadn't been for Pure.

— Abi, Pure regular

Watson adds: "I think we knew it was going to end probably about two years before, so we had a really good long run up to it, and it was a brilliant ending. I think the fact

that people knew it was going to end meant that they enjoyed it, whereas if it was going to go on and on forever, there was no incentive for people to go this week, when they could go next week. That finite nature helped people focus on it, I think. I was ready for it to end, everybody was ready for it to end.”



The Last Pure, The Legend, The Venue

Children, husbands, wives, careers and, to a lesser extent, other club nights are now the rituals that most Pure regulars devote their lives to, but the sense of nostalgia for Pure, even longing, runs pretty deep. Edinburgh is a transient city where trends and people come and go pretty quickly. But there's a permanence about Pure, and the legacy that it has left behind. For those involved in Edinburgh's house and techno scenes, it's a long shadow that no night has really managed to step out of.

Pure is a little over a year away from its 25th anniversary. It's a milestone that hasn't gone unnoticed, but there is a hesitancy about a reunion. That's partly because McIvor and Watson have both moved on, and inevitably, the crowds have moved on with them. There's a desire to protect the memories that remain, and also an acknowledgement that Pure, in the minds of many, lingered on long after the comedowns and the hangovers.

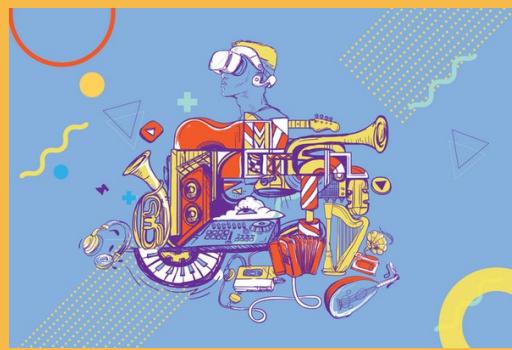
“I didn't know it then, but I met my husband at Pure and almost all of my friends now can be linked back to Pure,” says Abi. “If I hadn't gone to Pure I might have been looking for something for the rest of my life. I probably wouldn't have realised

that, but I wouldn't have the husband I have now, or the kids I have now, or the friends I have now. With hindsight, my life could not possibly be this rich and happy and full if it hadn't been for Pure."

*Some names have been changed



On a different note



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